

The History of Blacks in American Film (Part II)

by Claude Reed, Jr.

In Part I of this article we covered the involvement of Blacks in film from the silent days to the "talkies". We focused primarily on the independent Black filmmakers of the period from 1915 through the 1930's. In this concluding installment, we will examine the accomplishments of some notable Black film stars whose achievements are being rediscovered today. Because information on these stars varies in depth some will be covered at length, while others may only be briefly mentioned.

Madame Sul-Te-Wan

One of the most fascinating of the early Black actresses was Madame Sul-Te-Wan of which very little has been written. Madame Wan has the distinction of being the only Black woman employed as an actress in Hollywood during a time when Black women only worked as maids for white actresses.

In fact, because Madame Wan's widowed mother worked as a laundress for well-known actresses Mary Anderson and Fanny Davenport, Madame Wan was bitten by the acting bug.

As a young girl, she would deliver the wash to the actresses at the stage door and was often allowed to remain and see the show. It is said that on the following day, this Louisville, Kentucky girl would rehearse the show at school and tell her classmates that one day she aspired to be an actress.

Although Madame Wan's mother could not afford to have her professionally trained in the art of song and dance, Mary Anderson and Fanny Davenport were convinced of her talent. They encouraged and helped young Madame Wan. These two actresses were so impressed with Wan that they enlisted the help of the Mayor of Louisville, a Mr. James Whalen, who also owned the Buckingham Theatre. The mayor decided to audition Wan along with 25 "little colored girls who did singing and dancing". The first prize, a granite dishpan and spoon, went to the best "buck and wing dancer". Madame Wan won the contest. Her mother was so proud that she allowed her daughter to continue her performing pursuits when they moved to Cincinnati, Ohio.

Upon her arrival in Cincinnati, under the name of "Creole Nell" Madame Wan found work at the Dime Museum and later at some local theatres. She garnered wide recognition in

Cincinnati which led her to form her own theatre company "The Black Four Hundred" which employed 16 performers and 12 musicians. She travelled throughout the east coast with this company and a year later she organized "The Rare Black Minstrels". Her success, at this point, was so great that Wan decided to marry.

She moved to California with her husband but after being there for about two years, her husband deserted her with three children and ten month's back rent. The reason that her rent was ten months in arrears was due to her husband's squandering of money sent to pay the bills from Mad-



An early photo of Madame Sul-Te-Wan

ame Wan's performing engagements.

Reduced to charity and begging in her California residence in Arcadia, the Associated Charities of Los Angeles brought her to town and rented a home for her and the children. Not wishing to be a burden on the community, Wan tried to get white theatrical bookings but met no success. Except for a brief engagement at the Pier Theatre in Venice, California, Madame Wan found no meaningful work.

When she heard that D.W. Griffith was casting for "The Clansman" and would be using a number of Blacks she auditioned and was immediately hired.

Griffith recognized Madame Wan's talent and was so impressed that he expanded her part. She was cast as a "rich colored lady" but this part was cut from the picture by censors. After that role she was again unemployed but D.W. Griffith put Wan on the payroll with a 25 dollar check and 5 dollars a day whether she worked or not.

After "The Clansman" (which was

later titled "Birth of a Nation") was released Blacks were in an uproar due to the negative portrayals that were the film's cornerstone. As a result, Madame Wan was fired from the studio as the whites elected to blame her for Blacks fighting the film.

Madame Wan was so angered by this outrage, coupled with an accusation that she had stolen a book from a white actress, that she appealed to the influential Blacks in Los Angeles. She was unaware of the movie's politics as her only purpose was to eat. But upon learning how she was manipulated, through the influence of important Blacks and Lawyer Edward Burton Ceruti, Madame Wan was reinstated at the studio. She went on to be featured in such films as "The Marriage Market", "Up from the Depths", "Happy Valley's Oldest Boy" and "Intolerance".

Madame Sul-Te-Wan died in 1959 at the age of 83.

Nina Mae McKinney

At the age of 17, Nina Mae McKinney starred in the 1929 film "Hallelujah". Her sensuous portrayal in that production firmly established McKinney as the screen's first Black love goddess.

Born in Lancaster, South Carolina, Nina Mae McKinney moved to New York after landing a role in the famous "Blackbirds" revue. Soon after she joined the revue it was learned that King Vidor was auditioning performers for "Hallelujah". Vidor originally wanted Ethel Waters for the role of Chick, but when he spotted the sexy and beautiful McKinney Vidor looked no further. A vivid description of Nina Mae McKinney's role is found in the book "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks" by Donald Bogle.

"In McKinney's hands and hips, Chick represented the Black woman as an exotic sex object, half woman, half child. She was the black woman out of control of her emotions, split in two by her loyalties and her own vulnerabilities. Implied throughout the battle with self was the tragic mulatto theme...the white half of her represented the spiritual; the black half, the animalistic."

After the release of "Hallelujah" Nina Mae McKinney was unanimously lauded as "one of the most beautiful women of our time" and King Vidor proclaimed that it was she more than any other element that carried the film. Impressed by the excitement

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ment that McKinney created, MGM promptly signed her to a five year contract. However, instead of the expected sustained stardom that such a promising debut implied she soon found that there were no real starring roles for beautiful Black women.

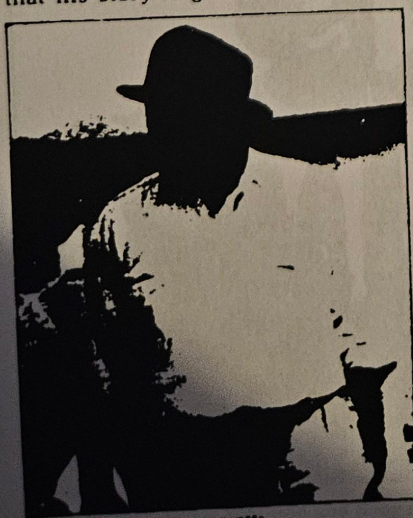
By 1934 Nina Mae McKinney, disillusioned with Hollywood, had moved to Europe. She was billed as the "Black Garbo" and toured nightclubs from Paris, to Greece to London with a singing/cabaret act. She found, as Josephine Baker had, that European audiences were more receptive to the talents of sexy, pretty Black women. In 1935 she appeared with Paul Robeson in the film "Sanders of the River". After returning to the United States she was featured in a series of all-Black films with her last important role coming in 1949 in the film "Pinky". In this film she played a "razor-totin", high-strung, high-yeller girl". However by now she was a shell of her former self.

As Donald Bogel relates "...it was hard to believe that the stocky, bleary-eyed harridan on screen had once been the bright-eyed, carefree Chick".

Although Nina Mae McKinney's later work was somewhat disappointing the prototype that she established in "Hallelujah" with hands on hips and her sassy, brassy voice was emulated by Black leading ladies from Dorothy Dandridge to Lena Horne to Lola Falana. It has even been said that Jean Harlow learned something from the earthy sensuality exemplified by Nina Mae McKinney.

Spencer Williams

Although Spencer Williams was briefly mentioned in Part I of this article for his participation in the 1930 film "Georgia Rose" it is important that his story is given a little more



Spencer Williams

space at least to offer insight into how far removed from his true personality was the character of "Andy". He is best known for portraying the slow-witted co-star of "Amos 'n' Andy" television series from 1951-54. Williams not only appeared in a number of early Black films but he became a well-respected writer.

Born in Louisiana in 1893, Spencer Williams initiated his stage career in New York after getting a job as a stage hand for Oscar Hammerstein. He studied comedy with the great Bert Williams prior to World War One at which time he served in the U.S. Army.

In 1929 when talking movies began, Spencer moved to Los Angeles aspiring to become a technician. He was soon employed to install sound equipment at Christie studios in Hollywood. Eventually, he was offered a job writing Negro dialect for all-Black comedies. After getting his start as a writer Spencer went on to become one of the first Black scenario writers.

Spencer Williams subsequently wrote and directed such films as "Tenderfeet" and "Go Down Death". He also wrote the script for the first Black horror film in 1940 titled "Son of Ingagi". As an actor, in addition to "Georgia Rose" and the "Amos 'n' Andy" series, he appeared in "The Bronze Buckaroo", "Harlem Rides", "Juke Joint" and the Paramount release "The Virginia Judge".

Rex Ingram

Born on the Mississippi steamer Robert E. Lee in 1895 near Cairo, Illinois, Rex Ingram went on to graduate Phi Beta Kappa from Northwestern Medical School in 1919. He began his Hollywood acting career in the early "Tarzan" movies. Ingram had bit parts in such films as "Sign of the Cross", "King of Kings", and "Salome".

By the 1930's he went to New York and appeared in Broadway stage productions that included "Going Home", "Lulu Bell", and "Porgy and Bess". In 1935 Ingram had a small role in the film "Emperor Jones" starring Paul Robeson.

In 1936 Rex Ingram returned to Hollywood and won the part of "De Lawd" in the film "Green Pastures"—his most famous role. After this portrayal, Ingram starred in a number of films including "Huckleberry Finn", "Cabin in the Sky" and "Anna Lucasta". He is also remembered for his role as a Sudanese soldier in the film "Sahara" in 1943. The film also starred Humphrey Bogart. The Motion Picture Committee for Unity gave Ingram the "most outstanding" Black actor of the year award for his work in

this film.



Rex Ingram

Anita Bush

Washington D.C. born Anita Bush moved to Brooklyn, New York with her family at the age of three. Her father opened a tailor shop near the Bijou Theatre and made clothes for the actors. Little Anita would deliver the clothes to the theatre and came to know the actors well.

She eventually played bit parts at the Bijou Theatre and made her debut in "Fatal Wedding". She later met Bert Williams at the Bijou and this meeting led to her touring with Williams and George Walker. Anita appeared in "Dahomey Musical" at the Shaftsbury Theatre in London for over a year. After Williams and Walker broke up in 1910, Anita Bush organized "The Hula Hula Dancers" and toured the United States. Her vaudeville troupe remained intact for over two years until an injury brought an untimely end to her vaudeville career.

Bush then organized the Anita Bush Players who specialized in dramatic productions. The players first performed in 1915 at the Lincoln Theatre in New York City. After a long and successful run Anita moved the group to the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. She ended up selling the troupe to the Quality Amusement Company due to financial problems. The Anita Bush Players were later called The Lafayette Players Stock Company.

In addition to the Black westerns that Anita Bush went on to star in that included "The Bull Doggers" with cowboy Bill Pickett, she also played in the Black film "The Crimson Scull".

Black Films After W.W. II

With the exceptions of a few pioneers like Oscar Micheaux and the 16 mm jukebox films made by Black continued on page 20

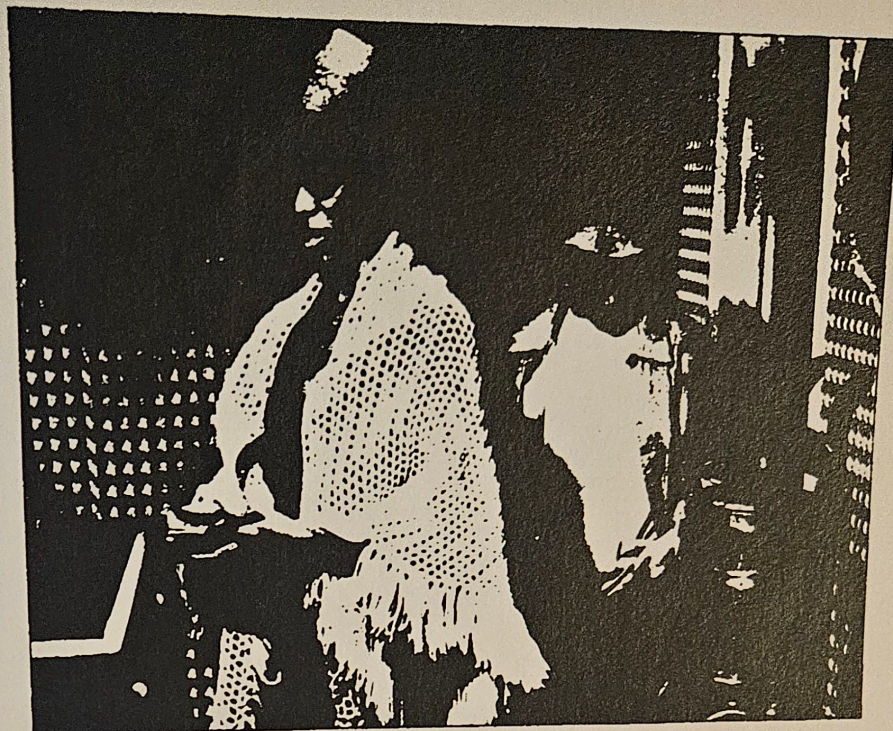
football star Fritz Pollard and a few others, the 1940's offered less in the way of meaningful Black films. Most films that included Blacks during this period focused on a war theme. "Stormy Weather" and "Cabin in the Sky" were made during this time representing exceptions rather than the rule.

By the 1950's movie themes assumed that Blacks had been accepted into the mainstream of America emphasizing individual attainment. Films on the Harlem Globetrotters and Joe Louis appeared. In 1950 the "Jackie Robinson Story" was released starring a surprisingly good Jackie along with Ruby Dee.

Sidney Poitier began to make his mark in films like the 1955 "Blackboard Jungle" and "The Defiant Ones" in 1958. Dorothy Dandridge starred in "Carmen Jones" in 1954 and "Island in the Sun" in 1957 with Harry Belafonte.

By the 1960's some serious cinema was being created by the likes of Leroi Jones (Imamu Baraka) with the 1967 "Dutchman" starring Al Freeman, Jr.; Melvin Van Peebles' 1968 "Story of a Three Day Pass"; as well as the 1968 films "Sounder" and "The Learning Tree".

The 1970's culminated in the peaking of what is now termed the "Blaxploitation" films which catered to Blacks' hunger to see themselves in any sense on screen. A few departures from Blaxploitation were attempted with films like "Leo the Last", 1970 starring Calvin Lockhart; "Five on the Blackhand Side" 1973 with Glynn Turman; the 1974 "Claudine" starring Diane Carroll; and independent



A Scene from *The Long Night*, 1975.

efforts like Woodie King and St. Claire Bourne's 1975 film "The Long Night".

Independent Black films such as "The Long Night" suffered from poor distribution but can still be rented by contacting the National Black Touring Circuit, Inc., 417 Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031.

Epilogue

Today, as we wander through the 1980's we are again faced with a shortage of positive Black films. A lesson, however, can be learned from our Black predecessors in this medium.

When Hollywood failed to treat us right we made our own! Today, more than at any time, do Black Americans possess the abilities on all levels necessary to create and produce what is truly germane to us.

We hope that in highlighting this brief history of Blacks in American Film that we may be encouraged to perpetuate the rich legacy left in our care.

We also hope that you, the reader, will forgive us for omitting many other notable contributions to Black films such as Dorothy Dandridge, Ethel Waters, George Randol and a great many others. We felt that since some of these people are more widely known, that our focus would be on the lesser knowns whose contributions have also been important.

We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the Schomburg Center, Donald Bogle, Thomas Cripps for his book "Black Film as Genre", and all those who made this article possible.

A special thank you is most certainly due to Valarie Shaw of the LA-DC Connection whom I connected with by phone, informed her of our interest in Black film, and she responded with a gold mine of information.



Jackie Robinson and Ruby Dee in the *Jackie Robinson Story*.